



## **Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk About Race and How to Do It**

### **Discussion Group Guide**

This guide offers some ideas for consideration, especially for those who have never before been part of a group discussion process. *(If you have sufficient time and inclination, I recommend using the full workshop series as a self-directed process. This will increase the benefits markedly.)*

### **Getting Together**

#### **Size**

- Keeping the discussion size small will allow each person to fully engage in the dialogue and offer his/her personal experiences and perspectives.
- Optimal group sharing often occurs when the dialogue is between 4-6 people.
- If your group is larger, you might consider the following:
  - Use the workshop series for a deeper, more comprehensive community process
  - Begin each session as a whole group to get the session started
  - Break up into small groups to answer a set of questions
  - Return to the whole group to share out and continue the dialogue to debrief
  - This cycle can be repeated within a single session.

#### **Scheduling**

- If you plan to read the book collectively, how often does the group want to meet? How quickly would you like to complete the 9 chapters?
  - Weekly sessions would mean a 2-month process
  - Every other week sessions would mean a 4-month process
  - Monthly sessions would mean a 9-month process
    - *Note:* Some chapters include multiple sets of guiding questions. You might choose to have multiple sessions treating a particular chapter.
- If the book will be read in its entirety prior to the start of a dialogue process, how long will your process last?
  - Will you move through your discussion chapter by chapter, reviewing each prior to a session? *(This would be my recommendation)* If so, use the information above to help generate a schedule.
  - If not, you might approach the sets of questions differently, pulling those that treat particular themes for individual sessions.

#### **Coordination**

- Someone will need to take responsibility for keeping things moving forward.
- Logistics to be managed might include: date/time/location setting and sending reminders regarding meetings and what is to be read.
- This responsibility can be shared, but a consistent coordinator can really help keep the group on track.

## Dialogue Process

- *Note of caution:* When faced with challenging questions, it is common for resistance to arise and people often move the conversation into less challenging territory. This could mean allowing the focus on white privilege and racism to shift into a focus on other issues or the actions of people of color. Although, asides can sometimes be meaningful, be mindful that anything that takes attention away from how we are facing race issues personally can indicate that we are hitting a place of defensiveness.

## Group Composition

- Is your group mixed race or composed of people with a similar racial background?
- Many issues consistently arise when engaging in dialogues on race. Although not an exhaustive list, here are a few things you might consider:
  - *Mixed race* groups offer contrasting experiences. People can benefit from hearing about differential life experiences.
  - *Mixed race* groups can also reinforce a common problem: when white folks are new to race dialogue, people of color are often perceived as resources in the room. This can mean that people of color end up carrying the burden of teaching the white folks. A multi-racial group would need to address this issue.
  - *Mixed race* groups offer practice on being open to talking about white privilege and racism in the presence of people of color. This can be effective when group members already have a trusting relationship with each other. With little or no prior relationship building, these conversations can be very difficult for all involved.
  - *Single race* groups offer people a chance to delve deeply into their own experiences with those with similar exposure and begin to practice keeping each other focused on white privilege. This can lead to deep insights. It can also lead to the group losing focus when resistances arise.
  - *Single race* groups offer people an opportunity to express ideas that usually are kept hidden out of fear or anxiety. Conversations can take place without worry of injuring or burdening people of different racial backgrounds.
  - *Single race* groups of white people can be seen as problematic for a number of reasons. If you are unsure of how to answer questions regarding this choice, refer to AWARE-LA's reasons for meeting in a white space for our group's rationale. (*Available on the witnessing whiteness website on the AWARE-LA page*)
- *A growth model:* You might consider starting with a *single race* group, reading and processing the information. This would allow those who are new to the dialogue to build skills prior to being required to practice them. Then the group can expand to create a broader, *mixed race* group that extends the dialogue and focuses on developing a witnessing practice.

## Moving the Discussion Together

### Goal Setting

- At the first session, discuss what each member hopes to get out of the process.
- Set goals and participation guidelines. What do members expect from one another?

### Facilitation

- Discuss how you plan to move through the questions.

- Is there need for a timekeeper?
- Choose a facilitator, someone who is in charge of helping to keep the conversation moving. Although not all groups will need this support, having somebody responsible for asking a new question or prompting the dialogue is helpful.
- Rotate the facilitator role among group members as desired. Although, it is preferable to have the most experienced person take the primary role.

### Creating a Safe Space

- Essential to recognize is that people enter dialogues on race with a lot of apprehension.
- It is important to take the time to create a sense of safety within the group for people to share deeply and express their true feelings. If people fear attack or vilification, they will remain guarded and open sharing will not happen.
- Here are a few issues involved in creating a safe space:
  - Acknowledge we are all entitled to be treated with respect and the group is engaged in a learning process. It is okay that we each pick up new ideas at different rates.
  - Discuss the role that challenge and critique will play in the group. Respectful challenging of ideas can be beneficial, while defensive critiques are destructive. Consider what each might look like so that the difference is clear to group members.
  - Create a shared agreement for how the group will deal with conflict in a way that maintains each person's humanity.

### Discussion Guidelines

- Review the following guidelines before each session. Ask group participants to 1) add any additional guidelines they think would be helpful, and 2) pick one to focus on while they participate in the discussion.
  1. Speak from your own experience – Recognize the difference between your truth (with a little t) and the idea of The Truth (with a big T). Speak from little t.
    - Be respectful that my experiences may be different from yours.
  2. It's a process.
    - Remember that not everything is obvious to everyone.
    - We may be on a similar journey, but the journey is not linear and we are all at different points.
    - Not everything we say has to be perfectly well formulated
  3. Step Up – Take risks to grow and push past your barriers.
  4. Step Back – Share speaking time and try to speak after others who have not spoken.
  5. Listen and hear actively, but discuss civilly and sincerely.
  6. Expressing strong feelings is okay and when strong feelings are expressed work at not taking it personally.
    - But, it is okay to ask for a few moments of personal time to regroup when you are experiencing strong emotion or hurt.
  7. Consider that issues may be *both/and* rather than *either/or*
  8. Impact matters more than intent.
  9. Be open to notice and explore moments when defensiveness and denial emerges and be willing to be engaged about these moments.
  10. Allow that biases aren't our fault. They don't reflect our character, just the messages we've consumed.



## **Witnessing Whiteness: The Need to Talk About Race and How to Do It**

### **Discussion Questions**

#### **Preface**

1. What concerns, questions, or hopes do you have as you begin reading this book?
2. How would you characterize your racial identity at this time in your life? In other words, how does being of your race affect your life?
3. Are there any familiar issues raised within the preface? How might your previous experience affect your reading of this book?

#### **Introduction**

1. When did you first realize that you are part of your race? Describe the situation. What did you learn from that experience?
2. How did later experiences solidify or shift your sense of yourself as a racial being?
3. Describe your first cross-race friendship. How did it form? Is it ongoing? If so, how has race played a role? If not, why not?
4. What do you think it means when a person of color says that a particular white person is not a “regular” white person or that s/he is a “different kind” of white person? Why might white people prefer to be seen as other than “regular”?

### **Part I: Dis-Ease in the White Community**

#### **Chapter 1 - Naming the Problem**

1. When you think of the word “whiteness” what comes to mind? Is there such a thing as white culture? What experiences or knowledge have informed your current opinion?
2. How strongly do you feel a connection to your ethnic heritage? How does your cultural way of life reflect this heritage? To what degree do you feel that you have lost your cultural background due to assimilation? How does this affect you?
3. How do you feel about using the term “colorblind” when discussing race issues? Have you been taught to see yourself as colorblind? What would it mean to give up the idea of colorblindness?
4. Why do you think the desire to transcend race is so prevalent in our society today? What feelings arise when considering that we might be unable to transcend race in our lifetime?
5. How have you used the strategies outlined in this chapter? Which have you used most often?
6. What issue(s) discussed in this chapter struck you most? Did anything inspire feelings of confusion, fear, anger, or sadness? What personal stories arose in you as you read?

#### **Chapter 2 – Facing the Dis-Ease**

1. In what ways have you, or people you know, felt or displayed anxiety in cross-racial situations? What happened? What thoughts and feelings arose?
2. What experiences have you had when racial dynamics in a situation became so loaded that grouping by race became obvious? In what ways might white folks’ anxieties and lack of

- awareness of race issues played a role? If you could offer two ideas to remedy the situation, what would you recommend?
3. What is the difference between empathy, sympathy, and pity? In what ways might each one play out in cross-race situations?
  4. What missteps have you either witnessed or made personally that arose from guilt, oversensitivity, or pity? Think of a particular instance and describe what happened. What would you do differently if you could return to that situation?
  5. Can you think of an experience where race and power came together to create a situation where a person of color likely walked away feeling mistreated? What role did you play in the situation? If you could return to that event, what would you do differently?
  6. What issue(s) discussed in this chapter struck you most? Did anything inspire feelings of confusion, anxiety, relief, or hope? What personal stories arose in you as you read?

### **Chapter 3 – Uncovering a Hidden History**

1. Before reading this chapter, what did you know about the creation of the white race? From what sources did you receive that information? School, media, family, peers? If the topic had never been discussed, why do you think this was so?
2. What do you find most striking or surprising about the economic and political aspects of the invention of the white race? What feelings arise? How might this knowledge alter the way you reflect on other areas of U.S. history?
3. To what degree do you feel that the qualities of the “white American self” reflect your upbringing or community? From your experience, what are the beneficial and problematic aspects of the qualities described as white/American?
4. What aspect of the legal history of the white race did you find most surprising? How does knowing this history offer new insights?
5. What risks do we run if we allow the information in this chapter to remain hidden?
6. How do you see the history of the white race influencing today’s societal structures and debates? Create a collective brainstorm.

## **Part II: The Journey into Witnessing**

### **Chapter 4 – Fellow Travelers: Engaging the Journey**

1. What pivotal experiences have you had that shifted how you see race? How did you respond in ways you feel good about? What situations can you recall where you wish you could return and alter how you participated?
2. What role did racism (whether obvious or subtle) play in your early familial and community experiences?
3. What is your personal relationship with your racial and ethnic background at this time? How much have you learned about your family’s racial history? How much have you learned about your family’s ethnic history?
4. What feelings arise as you read the six stories of self-learning in this chapter? How does your personal story relate to theirs? Which aspects of the stories mirror your own experience?

### **Chapter 5 – Connecting Visions: Whiteness in Sight**

1. When you think of “white culture” what comes to mind? Create a brainstormed list and discuss.

2. Reflect on your multiple social identities: race, gender, socioeconomic level, sexual orientation, educational attainment, religion, citizenship status, language ability, etc. Which of these identities have offered you advantages, and which have you experienced as disadvantages?
3. What feelings arise when you hear that being white means receiving privileges in society, whether sought out or not?
4. How might the norms reflected in our media choices affect what we expect of others in our workplace and community environments?
5. What kind of support/reminders will be necessary to keep you attentive to looking for how white privilege plays a role in your environment? How willing are you to create a relationship that asks you to remain observant regularly?
6. What would it mean for your life if you dedicated yourself to engaging more fully in relationships that involve conflict? What hopes and fears arise when considering that possibility?

### **Chapter 6 – Blindness at the Crossroads: Leaps of Faith**

1. When have you been in a conflict-filled situation with a person of a different race than you? What happened? What feelings arise if you consider that your racial awareness (or lack thereof) might have played a role? To what degree do you feel resistant to seeing yourself as partially, or wholly, responsible for what occurred? Why?
2. Where in your life are you challenged to see yourself racially? What is it like for you to be challenged in this way? Describe what thoughts and feelings arise.
3. What anxieties arise when you think about extending yourself across race in new ways?
4. How have you learned to deal with conflict? What feelings would arise if you felt wrongly accused? How would you deal with the situation?
5. When have you chosen to disengage from conflict across race before you were able to reach a resolution? What fueled that decision? Looking back, is there something you could have done to help find a shared agreement?

### **Chapter 7 - Interior Shadows: Lingerin Racism**

1. What feelings arise when you think about struggling against racism and white privilege as a lifelong effort?
2. What concerns come to mind when you consider how you can commit to active, ongoing internal work against lingering racism?
3. How do you think an increased acknowledgment of lingering race issues between you and your friends/colleagues would affect your relationship?
4. In your daily life, what situations provoke anxiety, shame or guilt in you? How do you handle those feelings?

## **Part III: The Work of Witnessing Whiteness**

### **Chapter 8 – How Do We Witness?**

1. How ready are you to commit to developing a personal action plan to increase your ability to respond to racism? What concerns do you have that might limit your interest in making this commitment?

2. Which of the practiced responses to racism might best suit your personal style? When have you used one or more of the responses previously? Are you willing to do some role-playing with each other to hone your skills? If not, what else can you do to increase your comfort with these responses?
3. How likely are you to begin engaging in dialogue about racism and white privilege with your close friends, family, or colleagues? What factors affect your willingness and confidence?
4. After reading about the conflict-filled dialogue following the viewing of an episode of Oprah and what we can learn from that situation, what struck you most? What do you think is most meaningful about the story of the author's growing capacity to stay in heated dialogues? How do you think you would respond if you were in a similar situation? Why?
5. How much encouragement to develop an antiracist practice do you expect to receive from your family, friends, and colleagues? What additional community supports will be required in order for you to continue on this journey? What will be needed in order for a witnessing community to be developed and sustained?
6. Develop a personal action plan that you can commit to. Detail the next steps you will take to build your knowledge, skills, capacity, and community. Share your personal plan with your dialogue partners. Create a shared agreement about how you will follow-up with each other to ensure that your plans are successfully implemented.

## **Chapter 9 – How Can We Create a Witnessing Culture?**

1. How has your life been influenced by the idea of the “rugged individualist?” In your own words, how would you describe the difference between being an individualist versus being *individuated*, to use Carl Jung's phrase?
2. Where in your body do you feel the issues that are raised in this text? How much do you operate out of your head, your gut, or your heart? To what degree do you recognize the tendency to intellectualize?
3. In what ways do you feel obligated to continue witnessing? If you remain unsure, why?
4. Who are two people in your life that you might turn to for reinvigoration when you feel inclined to stop being vigilant about witnessing whiteness?
5. Imagine that you are only aware of 1% of the racism that has been perpetuated against people of color within the last 30 years. How might that lack of knowledge adversely impact your ability to relate to your cross-race colleagues or peers?
6. What lingering feelings, thoughts, and questions, linger after you finished reading the book? What will you do and/or to whom will you turn to explore further?